

# *On Life and Meaning*

MARK PERES

## **Episode 98 – Jess George – Hope and Optimism**

### *Systems Intelligence*

And now a personal word,

A few years ago, when I was leading *Charlotte Viewpoint*, I was thinking a lot about issues facing the city—issues such as community engagement, racial segregation, and the wealth and poverty divide—and how the city might solve them. I became enamored by systems intelligence (SI) theory. SI brings together systems thinking and multiple intelligence theory and touts a methodology to address deeply embedded systemic issues.

Here is SI theory in a nutshell: a system is a construct within which people and things operate. Systems are all around us. Systems have certain features: they have interconnecting elements, they have generative power beyond those elements, and new elements emerge from systems. There are mechanical and social systems, such as transportation and political systems, and there are human systems, such as families, friends, companies, neighborhoods, cities, and any group of people in a room. Human systems shape how we think and act. Systems can deepen problems but also can unlock solutions.

Systems intelligence theory asserts we are only as good as our cognitive ability to act effectively within systems. SI is a domain of intelligence that combines whole-brain engagement (left-brain reasoning with right-brain pattern recognition) with situational awareness and pragmatic optimism to make things work and create desired results. SI can be taught. A good facilitator can introduce SI methods to a group of people and elevate their creative capacity to get good things done.

I was all-in. I thought I could help Charlotte and organizations address systemic issues. I also hoped to earn some money for *Charlotte Viewpoint*. I wrote white papers and articles on SI. I put together PowerPoints and workshop exercises, gave presentations to community leaders, and pitched decision-makers I knew. One of those decision-makers was Jess George.

At the time Jess was executive director of the Latin American Coalition. In August 2010 Jess and I talked over a plate of El Salvadoran vegetarian pupusas at El Pulgarcito restaurant on Central Avenue in Charlotte. Jess shared her ambition of fulfilling her organizational mission more powerfully. I proposed SI workshops that would combine

appreciative inquiry, role-play simulation, scenario building, and strategic planning. Jess considered it carefully and, with hope and optimism, said yes.

In October and November of that year, I and a colleague, Alex Gregor, led four half-day SI development sessions with the Latin American Coalition. Jess did the hard work of managing her team and helping us pilot concepts. By the final session, the coalition clarified their work in the Charlotte region and steps to reach their goals.

*Charlotte Viewpoint* could have used the same exercise as within a year I announced my resignation as publisher. My days of systems intelligence consulting were behind me.

But when I am with Jess, I think of how profoundly she embodies whole-brain thinking and pragmatic optimism. She elevates the creative capacity around her to get good things done. She did it as an ally to her Latin American friends and neighbors. She is doing it now building out physical infrastructure that elevates the systems intelligence of our community. And she does it with the love that informs her relationships, which is the greatest systems intelligence of all.

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